

SABAH AND SARAWAK

The More Things Change the More They Remain the Same

James Chin

Politics in East Malaysia is different from Peninsula Malaysia — both in terms of content, motives, and rhetoric. The different history, culture, and ethnic configurations ensure that politics in both states are dictated more by local factors than the simple Malay–non-Malay; Muslim–non-Muslim dichotomy found in peninsula politics.

Sabah

The two main features of Sabah politics have been political patronage and shifting loyalties. Those in power commonly use the state's natural resources, especially the awarding of timber concessions and business opportunities to loyal supporters and financial backers, to cement political ties. Another feature has been the rapid shifting of electoral loyalty. The ruling party in Sabah usually holds office for roughly a decade before being rejected by the voters. In the 1970s Sabah politics was dominated by Mustapha Harun and his party, the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO). Mustapha ruled Sabah as an autocrat from 1967 to 1975 before he was rejected by the electorate in favour of "Berjaya" also known by its full name as Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (Peoples Racially-United Front of Sabah). Berjaya's rule lasted until 1985, when it was dislodged by Parti Besatu Sabah (PBS, or Sabah Unity Party). The PBS government lasted until 1994, when defections caused its downfall.¹ Since then, Sabah has been ruled by a Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. The predominant ethnic group in Sabah is the Kadazan-Dusun (18.4 per cent), followed by Bajau (17.3 per cent), and Malays (15.3 per cent). The Chinese constitute only about 11 per cent of the population.

Coalition Pains

The year 2003 started with the replacement of six community development leaders by representatives of PBS which rejoined the Sabah BN the previous year but did not get any political posts in government for a year as part of its rehabilitation process. The PBS-6 replaced United Pasok Kadazandusun Murut

JAMES CHIN is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

Organisation (UPKO) and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) representatives. All three parties — PBS, UPKO, and PBRS claim to represent Kadazan-Dusun political interests and the move to appoint PBS representatives caused ripples within the coalition. The UPKO and PBRS leaders protested directly to Kuala Lumpur over the appointments but to no avail.

This minor upheaval signalled the start of a much bigger contest — to find a replacement for the state's Chief Minister. Chong Kah Kiat's term under the unique "rotating Chief Minister" system was up. The unique rotation system, devised by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in the heat of campaigning for the 1994 Sabah state election, gave opportunity to leaders from the three major political groupings — Muslim bumiputeras (MB), Chinese and non-Muslim bumiputeras (NMB) — turns to lead the state government for a two-year duration. Mahathir's offer was a key reason why the BN was able to win significant support from the Chinese and NMB voters in 1994. While the rotation system gave the NMB and Chinese communities a chance to be in the top political job, in practice it was problematic. The two-year term was simply too short for any leader to carry out long-term plans and created confusion in the bureaucracy. Every two years a new leader would emerge, bringing with him hundreds of new political cronies and appointees, and new policy directions. The system had also produced the largest number of living ex-chief ministers among all the states in Malaysia — six. Three are serving in the state cabinet.

This arrangement was heavily criticized by Sabah UMNO, which has the largest number of representatives in the Dewan Undangan Negeri (DUN, or State Legislative Assembly). Sabah UMNO had every right to demand the chief ministership exclusively. In 2001, after intense lobbying by Sabah UMNO, Mahathir modified the system to 2:1:1; that is, Sabah UMNO would get two terms (four years) while the Chinese and NMB would get one term each. The new formula meant the six-year cycle of MB, then Chinese, then NMB chief minister became an eight-year rotation cycle.

In early March, Mahathir announced that Sabah UMNO liaison chairperson Musa Aman would replace Chong.² The appointment of Musa raised eyebrows in Kota Kinabalu given that he was not the front-runner. He appeared to have received the nod due to his close relationship with the incoming Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Musa's appointment gave him an advantage over Salleh Mohd Said Keruak, who leads the other faction in Sabah UMNO. A former Chief Minister himself, Salleh was also the state Minister of Local Government in Musa's cabinet.

In April, controversy broke out when Jeffrey Kitingan applied to join Sabah UMNO. The younger brother of PBS's president Joseph Pairin Kitingan, Jeffrey's political career is typical of what Sabahans refer to as *katak* (frog).³ He started in the PBS, abandoned it just after the 1994 state elections, which led to the downfall of the Pairin government, joined Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat Bersatu (AKAR) in 1994, mounted and lost a leadership challenge in AKAR, rejoined the PBS in late 1996, quit and joined the PBRS in 2000, tried but failed to take over

the PBRS, quit the party in 2002, and declared himself a BN “independent”. With such a colourful track record, it was no surprise that Sabah UMNO refused to take him, though not without some drama. Initially Jeffrey produced a Sabah UMNO membership card. However, this was immediately revoked by the UMNO Supreme Council when it was discovered he had used his legal name on his identity card, Gapari bin Kitingan @ Geoffrey Kitingan, to apply successfully for membership. Undeterred, Jeffrey applied a second time and was again rejected.

The second half of the year was centred on preparations for the state election, due in April 2004. The distribution of seats became a thorny issue with the return of the PBS. Both the PBRS and UPKO, which were heavily defeated by the PBS when it was the opposition in the 1999 state election, knew that the PBS had a stronger claim to Kadazan-Dusun support. In the 1999 election, the PBS swept all the Kadazan-Dusun seats and all PBRS and UPKO candidates were defeated.⁴ The leaders of the PBRS and UPKO, moreover, were former PBS leaders who had broken away in 1994.

Part of PBS’s strong claim to represent the community was that Pairin was still deeply revered as the *Huguan Siou* or paramount leader of the Kadazan-Dusun. The dilemma for federal and Sabah UMNO leaders was this: they were keen to see a clean sweep of the Kadazan-Dusun areas but at the same time they did not want the PBS to dominate the Kadazan-Dusun constituencies. They would like to retain the UPKO and PBRS to counter PBS’s influence and split the Kadazan-Dusun politically. The fear is that a united Kadazan-Dusun political bloc would lead to problems for UMNO and the Federal Government in Kuala Lumpur. When the PBS dominated the Kadazan-Dusun votes and formed the state government in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Muslims felt marginalized in Sabah politics. Kuala Lumpur and the Sabah Muslims never felt comfortable with PBS’s political platform of strong state rights’ and links with the Catholic Church. Many leaders in the upper echelons of the PBS, including party leader Pairin, are staunch Catholics.⁵

Seat distribution among the Chinese BN parties also posed a problem. Sabah MCA and Sabah Gerakan do not hold any seats in the DUN while the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) were adamant that their hard-won seats were not given away. The SAPP had already declared that it was after nine seats⁶ while Sabah MCA publicly called for it to be given three seats (two state and one parliamentary) in the upcoming election.⁷ Internally there were problems as well. Attempts were made to drop Chong Kah Kiat, the LDP president who had just completed a term as chief minister.

The Chinese issue was further complicated by the re-emergence of the Sabah Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the Chinese areas. Sabah DAP had been dormant for most the 1990s when the opposition vote was captured by the PBS. But with the PBS back in the BN fold, Sabah DAP re-emerged as the main opposition in the Chinese community. In the 1980s, Sabah DAP was quite successful and had won several parliamentary seats — four “rockets” (the

party's election symbol) flew successfully in the 1986 general elections.

Despite there being only a few thousand Indians among Sabah's population of 2.6 million,⁸ the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) established a branch in Sabah in the 1990s. Ever since the party has been wrecked by infighting. The year 2003 was no different — in September, three of the five MIC division heads called on Chief Minister Musa Aman to sack Sabah MIC chief V. Jothi from his politically appointed posts of Sabah Ports Authority Deputy Chairman, Sabah Energy Corporation board director, and deputy chairman of Tug-boat Corporation Sdn. Bhd. Sabah MIC deputy chief A.S. Sivathayalan accused Jothi of grabbing all three posts, which he claimed were offered to Sabah MIC and that the party had earlier decided to allow Jothi to hold only one post with the other two going to other MIC representatives.⁹

Unlike the Kadazan-Dusun and Chinese areas, the Malay/Muslim seats were firmly under Sabah UMNO. And unlike the Chinese BN parties, Sabah UMNO faced no real political threats. Parti Keadilan Nasional (or Parti Keadilan Rakyat after its recent merging with Parti Rakyat) was weak, with no organization to speak of. Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) had only a small group of hardcore fundamentalists who did not enjoy mainstream support. Previous political forays by both parties had been electoral disasters.

The seat distribution issue was compounded by a redrawing of electoral boundaries that added twelve constituencies — raising the total number of constituencies to sixty. Of these constituencies, thirty-four were dominated by MB voters, seventeen by NMB, six by the Chinese, with three mixed areas. Sabah's twenty parliamentary seats were also increased to twenty-five. The new boundaries meant that all future Sabah governments would be formed with a Muslim base given that they control slightly more than half the seats. The redrawing was a deliberate attempt by the federal and UMNO leaders to ensure that the NMB will no longer be in a position to win elections on their own.

Kidnapping

The end of the year saw another kidnapping incident at a tourist resort. The west coast of Sabah has always been vulnerable to incursions from the southern Philippines and the people living in the area do not recognize the political border. For several decades, thousands of Filipinos (mostly Muslim Moros) have moved in and out of Sabah illegally through the narrow straits that separate Sabah from the southern Philippines. In 2000, Abu Sayyaf rebels kidnapped tourists (including several Westerners) and workers from the Sipadan resort. A few months later, they kidnapped another group of tourists. The Sipadan hostages were shipped to the southern Philippine island of Jolo where they were held for nearly a year in the jungle. They were later ransomed for several millions.

This time the target was Borneo Paradise Resort and six foreign workers were taken to the southern Philippines. Unlike earlier incidents, no Western

tourist was involved. The latest round of kidnapping will mean that more tourists will be staying away from Sabah. It will also ensure that border security will be one of the key issues in the coming general election. Many Sabahans do not like the fact that Filipinos appeared to have unlimited access to and from Sabah. Border control comes under the federal government and many Sabahans think that the federal government is not serious about border control. During periods when Sabah was under opposition control, agents linked to the federal government arranged for the entry of Muslim Filipinos in order to tilt the voting population in favour of the BN.

Sarawak

Sarawak politics can best be characterized as an unequal contest between the three main groups: the Melanau-Malay community who represents the Muslims, the Chinese, and the Iban community who represents the majority indigenous Dayaks.¹⁰ According to Census 2000, the Dayaks accounted for 30.1 per cent of the state's 2.1 million population, followed by the Chinese (26.7 per cent) and Malay/Melanaus (23.0 per cent).

When Sarawak helped form the Malaysian Federation in 1963, power was held by the Ibans but in 1970 power shifted to the Melanau-Malay community, where it has remained ever since. The Chinese constitute the second most powerful grouping due mainly to their stranglehold on the state economy, followed by the Ibans. While the contest between these three groups is fierce, infighting within each group is often fiercer.

Like Sabah, political patronage using timber concessions and contacts to win support, has been a key feature of Sarawak politics. But unlike Sabah, politics in Sarawak has been remarkably uneventful over the past three decades. Since 1970 the state has been ruled by the Sarawak Barisan Nasional (SBN), consisting of Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), and Sarawak National Party (SNAP). In the 1980s, a SNAP breakaway group established the Parti Bansya Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) and, in 2002 another SNAP breakaway group established the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP). Both the PBDS and SPDP were admitted into the SBN. Broadly speaking, the PBB represents the Muslims, the SUPP the Chinese, and the SNAP, PBDS, and SPDP, the Dayaks. But the power configurations are different: the PBB and SUPP hold real power in the SBN and the other three Dayak-based parties — SNAP, PBDS, and SPDP — are seen as “little brothers” in the coalition. The leader of the PBB, by convention, becomes the chief minister while the leader of the SUPP is made the first deputy chief minister and controls the all-important Ministry of Finance.

Dayak Leadership Dilemmas

The year started with the continuing saga of “Dayak Leadership Dilemmas”. The long history of political infighting among the Dayak community had, in a space of less than two years, torn SNAP and the PBDS apart.

In 2002, William Mawan Ikom, then SNAP's vice-president, walked out of a party meeting with eight other senior leaders. They had just disagreed with the party president James Wong's decision to expel the party treasurer, Tiong King Sing, the member of Parliament (MP) for Bintulu. They demanded that Wong, eighty-years old and SNAP president since 1981, retire and hand power over to a younger generation. When Wong refused, Mawan staged an Extra-ordinary General Assembly Meeting (EGM) on 11 August 2002 that elected Mawan as the "new" SNAP president.¹¹

The genesis of the power struggle goes back to the 1999 General Election when Tiong, a controversial timber merchant, won the Bintulu constituency unexpectedly. The voters had backed him when he allegedly told them that he would finance part of the cost of bringing TV3 transmission to the Bintulu region.¹² A contractor began work on the RM4.5 million transmission tower. When no payment was forthcoming, the contractor sued SNAP, infuriating the party leadership. After all, Tiong, a millionaire, would have little trouble footing the bill. The matter was brought to SNAP's central executive committee and Tiong was issued with a show-cause letter on the ground of indiscipline. He was also suspended and removed as the party's treasurer. Tiong claimed that he was not personally liable for the debt, as the party had agreed to the project before the election.¹³ Part of Tiong's recalcitrant behaviour was due to a plot to back Mawan for the party presidency against Wong at the next party's congress. By forcing Wong to confront him early, Tiong created a political crisis that would split the party before the party congress, making it easier to defeat Wong. Wong fell into the trap when he insisted on expelling Tiong.

With both Wong and Mawan claiming to be the legal "president", the Registrar of Societies (ROS) deregistered the party on 5 November 2002. Three days later, the same ROS announced the registration of Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) led by Mawan. The SPDP was immediately accepted into the SBN. Mawan was able to bring with him all the former SNAP DUN members and parliamentarians, including Richard Wong, son of James Wong and a DUN member. In April 2003, the federal Court of Appeal granted a stay of execution of ROS's decision. Despite this, SNAP was left out the cold when the SBN refused to invite it to coalition meetings. Instead, the SPDP has taken over all the political positions held previously by SNAP at the state and federal levels. Even if the Court of Appeal rules in favour of SNAP, it is unlikely that it will be accepted back into the SBN.

The infighting in the PBDS also had its roots over a leadership tussle. In 2001, Leo Moggie, the founding president, told key members that he was considering retiring at the next parliamentary elections. This sparked off a power struggle between the two biggest factions in the PBDS. One faction was led by James Jemut Masing who had the support of Taib Mahmud, and the other by Daniel Tajem, the incumbent deputy president who had the support of Moggie. Moggie and Tajem had started the party together. Masing was the state Minister of Social Development and Urbanisation while Tajem had just

returned from New Zealand after serving two terms as Malaysian High Commissioner there.

Proposals were put forward to avert a fight. Among them was to have Tajem as the president with Masing as his deputy. Masing, however, turned down the offer as the majority of PBDS branches had already declared their support for him and his running mate, Sng Chee Hua.¹⁴ Moreover, according to Masing, Moggie has previously named Masing as his preferred choice as successor.¹⁵

As the struggle became more personal and bitter by the day, Moggie suddenly resigned on 25 June 2003, just a month prior to party elections. Moggie was unhappy that his peace formula — a Tajem-Masing team — was rejected outright by Masing. He then went public with his support for Tajem and criticized Masing, to the extent of calling Masing “paranoid”.¹⁶

Moggie’s resignation meant that Tajem automatically became acting president until the next party election. This allowed Tajem to appoint his supporters to the crucial Credentials Committee. The committee decided which party branches were eligible to attend the party election and who were to be the candidates for party posts. On 11 July 2003, the chairman of the committee, Dr Jawie Masing (no relation to James Jemut Masing) and a known supporter of Tajem, predictably announced that Tajem was the sole candidate for the president’s post. Tajem’s running mate, Joseph Salang, incidentally was also the only nominee for the number two position in the party.¹⁷ Masing predictably rejected the results and organized a rival Triennial Delegates Conference (TDC) on 24 July, which saw him “elected” as president of the PBDS, with Sng Chee Hua as his deputy. Meanwhile Tajem also held a TDC, which saw him formally “elected” president unopposed with Joseph Salang as his deputy.

By early August 2003, the PBDS had two of everything, from two party “presidents” to two “Supreme Councils”. Despite Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s pleading to both sides to reconcile, the split was too deep and too personal. Masing said he was willing to settle the differences only if there was a fresh party election supervised by the ROS.¹⁸ Supporters of the Masing camp also began to file reports to the ROS about the “irregularities” that led to Tajem’s uncontested victory. The plan was for the ROS to investigate the complaints and deregister the PBDS. This would allow Masing to register a new party. This simple plan was based on what had happened to the SNAP crisis just a year earlier.¹⁹

In October the ROS issued show-cause letters to both Tajem and Masing. Unfortunately for Masing, the letter from the ROS said his alternate TDC in Bintulu was “null and void”. Sensing victory, Tajem and his group submitted a 150-page reply to the ROS in mid-November but to their shock, the ROS rejected the letter and officially deregistered the PBDS on 5 December. Just before Christmas, Tajem appealed directly to the Home Minister, Abdullah, also the Prime Minister, to overrule the ROS’s decision.

Meanwhile, Masing's supporters applied to register a new political party, Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), in early November. By year's end, Abdullah had not decided on PBDS's final appeal and the ROS had not approved the registration of the PRS.

In both the SNAP and PBDS crises, Taib Mahmud, the powerful Chief Minister, refused to intervene despite the fact that the infighting could potentially damage the SBN's chances among the Dayak voters. This led to lingering suspicion that the crisis facing the Dayak parties was orchestrated. In the PBDS case, Taib had a clear motive. In 1987, Tajem, then a deputy chief minister, was one of the key leaders who attempted to topple Taib when the PBDS lined-up with Abdul Rahman Yakub, Taib's uncle and predecessor as chief minister. The PBDS and Yakub had arranged for a majority of the DUN to be flown to Kuala Lumpur where they signed a letter declaring that they had "lost confidence" in Taib. Moggie and Yakub demanded that Taib resigned immediately. The political crisis, called the "Ming Court Affair", caused Taib to call a snap election in which he narrowly won. The PBDS was to stay in the opposition at the state level for the next seven years until it was readmitted on Taib's terms in 1994.²⁰ Tajem's appointment as Malaysian High Commissioner to New Zealand was arranged soon afterwards by Taib in order to remove him from Sarawak. Since 1987 Taib never really forgave Moggie or Tajem for trying to bring him down. Thus it was not a surprise that he covertly backed Masing in his attempts to take over the PBDS.

The infighting within the PBDS and SNAP benefited the PBB and SUPP. If the Dayaks were united, they easily could pose a threat to the Melanau hold on power. The Chinese were uneasy with the prospect of Dayaks in power. In the 1987 PBDS putsch, the Chinese community was shocked by reports of how the PBDS leaders drank red cordial during a PBDS function; the red colour was meant to symbolize the PBDS drinking "Chinese blood".²¹ The current arrangement between the PBB and SUPP where both sides hold the prime political position in Sarawak suits the Melanau and Chinese communities. A united Dayak community would complicate this arrangement.

April Madness and Other Political Developments

April was an unusual month. There were three politically significant events. First, a major row broke out when the federal Home Ministry imposed a ban on the Iban-language Bible, Bup Kudus, although it has been widely used by churches in Sarawak for the past fifteen years. It was banned apparently because it breached the guidelines for non-Islamic religious books, using words that are normally reserved for Islam such as Allah. The Association of Churches in Sarawak went public, calling on the government to review the ban. The Bar Council and the DAP also called for the ban to be lifted.²² A meeting with the Home Minister (also Deputy Prime Minister) Abdullah saw the ban lifted two weeks later.

Second, State Assemblyman for Meluan, Wong anak Judat, was given a seat with the government backbenchers in the DUN. Judat, a former PBB member who had contested the 2001 state elections as an independent, had joined the newly formed Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP). With Wong Judat officially a BN member, the DUN was left with only one opposition member, Chiew Chiu Sing, from the Democratic Action Party (DAP).²³

Third, Sulaiman Abdul Rahman Taib, son of Taib Mahmud, was questioned by the police following a police report lodged by a former TV personality Avaa Vanja Ramli alleging that Sulaiman had assaulted her. The allegation made headlines in all the major national dailies, but not a single Sarawak-based newspaper — Chinese, English, or Malay — carried anything on it. This episode reinforced the view that Taib's control over Sarawak was absolute.²⁴ The case was later dropped for "insufficient evidence".²⁵

In June, Bandar Kuching MP Song Swee Guan resigned from the SUPP. Song was one of the SUPP's most senior MP who is also the former state assembly speaker and Kuching's mayor.²⁶ Song's resignation came about when he was declared a bankrupt by the High Court on 8 May over a RM300,000 debt. This was not the first time he was in financial trouble. In 2000 the SUPP raised a few hundred thousand ringgit to stop Song being declared a bankrupt. This time the party refused to help him primarily because the party knew that there would be no by-election. Under Malaysian law, a by-election is not required if a general election is less than a year away. The SUPP is betting that the scandal surrounding Song will be forgotten by the time the general election is held, most probably in the first half of 2004.

In September, Abdul Taib Mahmud made headlines when he said he would not pick any female below the age of forty as a candidate. Politics, he added, should not be the priority for women below forty, as they would have problems dividing time between work, marriage, and motherhood. Hostile reactions came from a federal female cabinet minister, UMNO Puteri, Wanita MCA, and other women groups. Taib was forced to back down; he accused the press of misquoting him. Like the earlier incident involving his son, local Sarawak newspapers did not report the hostile reactions at all.²⁷

In August human rights group Suaram director Cynthia Gabriel was barred from entering Sarawak when she was detained at the Kuching International Airport. Under the terms of entry into Malaysia in 1963, Sarawak (and Sabah) retained control over immigration. A month later, another Kuala Lumpur-based anti-logging activist, Co-ordinator for the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, Colin Nicholas, was also barred from entering Sarawak. On both occasions, the deportees were made to wait at Kuching airport and sent back to Kuala Lumpur. Both apparently had been on the black list since 1998.²⁸

Towards October, pressure mounted on Taib to announce his retirement date. Many people outside Sarawak do not realize that Taib came into power in 1981, the same year Mahathir ascended the Prime Minister's office. Other than an attempted putsch in 1987, Taib has been in total control since. He

could easily be referred to as the most powerful Chief Minister or Menteri Besar in Malaysia. The federal government gives him unprecedented autonomy and basically leaves him alone on any internal state matter.²⁹ There is also a high degree of resentment against Taib for the way his family has become one of the richest families. His family controlled Cahaya Mata Sarawak (CMS) one of Sarawak's biggest conglomerates, with interests in banking, finance, and construction, all built in less than a decade through the awards of huge public infrastructure projects. Sarawak is, moreover, the only state where UMNO is not found. Just prior to retiring as Prime Minister, Mahathir called on long-serving BN leaders to step down. Taib was careful not to ignore it but the PBB-controlled Sarawak Tribune, the mouthpiece of the ruling SBN, ran a front-page story with the headline "Let leaders decide when to retire: Taib".³⁰

Like neighbouring Sabah, most of the second half of the year saw Sarawak dominated by preparations for the coming general elections. Again, like Sabah (where politics is dominated by a single party), there appeared to be no credible challenges to the dominance of the SBN. The PBB is secure in the Melanau/Malay Muslim areas. The much-anticipated challenge from Parti Keadilan Nasional collapsed in the previous state election and PAS attracted minuscule support.³¹ The Dayak areas are dominated by the infighting within the PBDS and the unresolved SNAP/SPDP issue. Nevertheless the SBN is not worried about the Dayak areas given that all the protagonists are BN supporters — it does not really matter who wins as they will ultimately still be BN backbenchers. However, a problem might come from the Chinese areas. The Sarawak DAP, a strong force in the 1980s to the mid-1990s, appeared to be attracting some support again. The Chinese community may decide that it "wants it both ways", that is, support both the opposition and the BN given that there is now only one opposition member in the DUN. Some sections of the Chinese community feel that the SBN will "work harder" if there is more opposition in the august House.³²

Conclusion

Politics in Sabah and Sarawak basically centres on competition between the indigenous population (politically split into Muslims and non-Muslims) and the Chinese. On the whole, relations between the various ethnic groups are relatively good. Part of this has to do with the history of the two states but the prime reason appears to be the population mosaic. No single ethnic group enjoys a clear overall majority, thus dominance by a single ethnic group is not so much an issue.

This of course does not mean that politics is less vibrant in both states. In each state the major indigenous group, namely, the Kadazan-Dusun in Sabah and the Dayak in Sarawak, was manoeuvred out of power by the Muslims, causing much of the political tensions. The Chinese in both states appeared to be satisfied with their status as the commercial class with direct access to the corridors of power. Despite their small size, they have managed to protect and

expand their economic interests. In both states, the Chinese are in clear control of the economy and occupy the second most powerful bloc after the Muslims.

In Sabah the year was mainly about Sabah BN trying to accommodate the return of the PBS into the ruling coalition. The PBS's return marked the end of Kadazan-Dusun opposition but it also posed problems for the other two BN Kadazan-Dusun-based parties that claim to represent the community in the BN. With the chief ministership in the hands of Sabah UMNO, many are still waiting to see if the PBS can deliver the goods, especially in the coming general election. The delineation of the constituencies in Sabah has ensured that all elections from now on will be biased towards the Muslim community, as they are the majority in more than half the constituencies. Unless the NMB and Chinese parties can attract support from the Muslims, all future governments in Sabah will have to rely on a Muslim party as its core.

In Sarawak, where there is no real opposition, the central drama revolves around the self-destruction of the SNAP and PBDS. The fact that Chief Minister Taib refused to intervene in both cases gives credibility to persistent rumours that the current round of Dayak infighting is an orchestrated attempt to weaken the Dayak community, principally the Iban. If the Dayaks remain united, Taib may be headed for political turbulence, as they would be in a strong position to exert pressure on him to retire after more than two decades, and follow Mahathir's example of a graceful exit. As it stands now, there is no group that can challenge the chief minister. No matter how the Dayak leadership dilemma is resolved, what is clear is that any ambition of the Iban community to put one of their own into the state's highest political office will not occur for the foreseeable future. As long as the Dayaks are constantly fighting among themselves, they will find it impossible to be politically assertive.

The year also saw the BN preparing for the upcoming general elections. All indications are that for the first time, the Sabah leadership is agreeable to the idea of holding the federal and state polls simultaneously. This will undoubtedly have political effects, as it will be much harder to separate federal and local issues. Hitherto state elections generated more heat than parliamentary elections for the simple fact that voters understood that decisions affecting their daily lives were more likely to be made in Kota Kinabalu or Kuching rather than Kuala Lumpur. If combined elections were to be held, voters might be a bit adventurous and split the vote, that is, vote for the BN at the local level and the opposition for federal seats.

As the year draws to a close, the general feeling is that very little has changed in the fundamentals of the body politic of both states. The non-Muslim indigenous groups in each state despite being the largest ethnic grouping, is kept out of power by the Muslims. The Chinese remain the second most powerful group, a position they have held for many years and a position they are comfortable with. The coming general election is not going to change this

power configuration. As they say, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

NOTES

1. See James Chin, "Sabah State Election of 1994: End of Kadazan Unity", *Asian Survey* 34, no. 10 (1994): 904–15; and James Chin, "Going East: UMNO's Entry into Sabah Politics", *Asian Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (June 1999): 20–40.
2. Musa was the state Finance Minister in Chong's cabinet. Musa in turn retained Chong as the state Minister for Tourism, Environment, and Culture when he took over as chief minister.
3. The frog analogy is used to refer to politicians who tend to hop among political parties. There are very few elected politicians in Sabah who can claim to have never *katak-ed* during their political careers. In fact the phenomenon is so common that a former PBS deputy president, Abdul Malek Chua, wrote a book on the subject entitled *YB For Sale*. "YB" stands for Yang Berhormat (The Honourable), a commonly used term for elected representatives. Ironically, Malek Chua was one of the most prominent *kataks* in Sabah politics.
4. In the 1999 state elections, the UPKO was known as the Parti Demokratik Sabah. After the party's disastrous performance in the election, it changed its name to the United Pasok Kadazandusun Murut Organisation in the hope that they could attract more support. The UPKO was the pioneer party of the Kadazan-Dusun led by Donald Stephens, the Kadazan-Dusun's first *Huguan Siou*. The current UPKO has no links with the old UPKO, however. For more details, see Chin Ung-Ho, "Kataks", *Kadazan-Dusun Nationalism and Development: The 1999 Sabah State Election* (Regime Change and Regime Maintenance in Asia and the Pacific Series no. 24, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1999) and P.J. Granville-Edge and Rajen Devadason, *The Sabahan: The Life and Death of Tun Fuad Stephens* (Selangor: Writers Publishing House Sdn. Bhd., 1999).
5. Audrey Kahin, "Crisis on the Periphery: The Rift between Kuala Lumpur and Sabah", *Pacific Affairs* 65, no. 1 (Spring 1992).
6. "SAPP Thinking of Nine Seats for State Polls", *Daily Express*, 7 September 2003.
7. "Go for Three Seats, Sabah MCA Urged", *Star*, 20 July 2003.
8. This is at best an estimate because of the problem of illegal migrants, almost all from southern Philippines and Indonesia.
9. "Brewing Crisis Spills Over", *Star*, 20 September 2003.
10. The term "Dayak" is commonly used to refer to all non-Muslim indigenous groupings such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kenyah, and more than twenty other groups.
11. "William Mawan Elected New SNAP President at Controversial Meet", *Malaysiakini*, 11 August 2002.
12. TV3 is the first private free-to-air television station in Malaysia.
13. "Sarawak's SNAP at Odds with Its Bintulu MP over Botched Election Promise", *Malaysiakini*, 23 March 2002.
14. "Entulu Fires Another Round of Salvo at Tajem", *Sarawak Tribune*, 7 April 2003.
15. "Stand by Your Choice, Moggie Told", *Sarawak Tribune*, 12 April 2003.
16. "PBDS Youth: Moggie's Right for Calling Masing 'Paranoid'", *Malaysiakini*, 10 September 2003.
17. "Tajem Returned Unopposed as PBDS President", *Sarawak Tribune*, 12 July 2003.
18. "Masing: Fresh Polls Only Way to Solve PBDS Crisis", *Star*, 30 July 2003.
19. "Fate of PBDS in the Hands of Registrar", *New Straits Times*, 6 November 2003.
20. The "Ming Court Affair" was so called because the rebels had used the Ming

Court Hotel as their base in Kuala Lumpur. James Chin, "PBDS and Ethnicity in Sarawak Politics, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 26, no. 4 (1996): 512–26.

21. *Borneo Post*, 13 April 1987.
22. "Sarawak Churches: Review Ban on Iban-Language Bible", *Star*, 16 April 2003.
23. "Backbencher Seat for Judat in Upcoming DUN Sitting", *Sarawak Tribune*, 22 April 2003.
24. "Dato' Sri Identified as Taib's Son but Sarawak Papers Play Dumb", *Malaysiakini*, 24 April 2003.
25. "DPP: Insufficient Evidence to Charge Taib's Son for Assault", *Star*, 11 May 2003.
26. "Song to Resign from SUPP", *Sarawak Tribune*, 5 June 2003.
27. "Taib Criticised over Stand on Age for Women Politicians", *New Straits Times*, 31 August 2003.
28. "Sarawak: Another Activist Denied Entry", *Malaysiakini*, 9 September 2003.
29. James Chin, "Federal-State Relations under Mahathir", in *Mahathir's Administration: Performance and Crisis in Governance*, edited by Ho Khai Leong and James Chin (Singapore: Times Books International, 2001), pp. 28–61.
30. "Let Leaders Decide When to Retire: Taib", *Sarawak Tribune*, 14 September 2003.
31. James Chin, "The Melanau-Malay Schism Erupts Again: Sarawak at the Polls", in *New Politics in Malaysia*, edited by Loh Kok Wah and Johan Saravanamuttu (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2003), pp. 213–27.
32. James Chin, "The Sarawak Chinese Voters and Their Support for the Democratic Action Party (DAP)", *Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 2 (1996): 387–401.

Copyright of Southeast Asian Affairs is the property of Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.